

Framing Storytelling: Indigenous Graphic Narratives

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WHEN TA-NEHISI COATES WROTE THE REBOOT OF MARVEL Comics's *Black Panther*, literary and comics circles alike awarded it much acclaim; the incredibly popular first issue sold out of its first print run in April 2016. *Black Panther* was part of a much wider refreshing of the Marvel Comics universe that included another character with a color-plus-animal appellation, Red Wolf. Emerging in the 1970s, Red Wolf's character appeared in multiple iterations and storylines, all featuring reductive, stereotypical depictions. When he was refreshed in 2015, the promotional material, even as it heralded an "All-New, All-Different" comics universe, unfortunately depicted Red Wolf with no appreciable differences from his 1971 debut. He was still a loincloth-wearing warrior, imagery critiqued by James Leask for inaccurately representing typical attire for the character's nineteenth-century Cheyenne background. This revamped Red Wolf did not fare much better in the issues themselves. Commentators hoped having Port Gamble S'Klallam artist Jeff Veregge on the illustration team would help the comic better represent Native Americans. Veregge's striking, Suquamish-inspired cover art for the series could not rescue it from dismal sales in its early issues, however, which were low enough to suggest the refreshed Red Wolf would not last long. (The series comprised six issues published between December 2015 and November 2016.) The mediocrity of the reissued Red Wolf, especially in the face of *Black Panther's* runaway success, should be instructive for comics creators. For instance, given that Veregge continues to find success both in mainstream comics and as part of the flourishing world of

independent, Indigenous-authored comics, major comics publishers might find more success if they commissioned Indigenous writers from independent comics for Indigenous characters and storylines. Fortunately, Red Wolf's tepid relaunch does not reflect the growth of Indigenous comics and their inclusion in Indigenous literary studies. These comics are receiving increasing attention and acclaim as Indigenous creators produce works that center their experiences and interests and honor Indigenous storytelling traditions.

Three independent comics collections—*Trickster* (2010), *Native American Classics* (2013), and *Moonsbot* (2015)—demonstrate the complex work Indigenous comics artists undertake. For one, artists in these collections collaborate on narratives with storytellers, sometimes drawing from existing styles or subgenres like superhero comics, at other times rejecting them for realistic styles. The unique format of comics also affords these artists opportunities to experiment with the long-standing association of Indigenous literature and oral traditions, whether in the use of narrative text boxes, the collaborative practices between artists and storytellers, or the joint efforts of authors and audiences to create meaning. Across the collections, the artists extend Indigenous storytelling traditions while producing innovative modern graphic narratives. Considering them chronologically demonstrates a continuation of the trend C. Richard King identifies in his article on mainstream and independent Indigenous comics: King reads “the former as powerful iteration of anti-Indianism that make claims on native cultures and histories and the latter as moments of resistance” (216). As independent comics flourish, they demonstrate how comics have, as King claims, “the capacity to unsettle the images and ideologies that energize anti-Indian racism in North American settler states” (219). One way comics enact this capacity in their form is by evoking earlier storytelling modes. Before examining the collections, an initial look at efforts to define comics will help situate these claims alongside wider scholarly interests, simultaneously underscoring the presence of Indigenous art and media at the heart of studies of this popular form.

Attending to older Indigenous literary practices has enriched the broader study of comics. For example, Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* provides a prominent definition of comics as “juxtaposed pictorial images and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (20). Part of this definition's appeal is its inclusivity, both for

the diversity of current works and for historical approaches. McCloud himself points out how his definition puts modern print comics at the end of a long continuum of sequential art. As an early example of comics, he cites a Mayan codex, which he calls a “picture manuscript” (10). Expanding beyond Mayan codices, other forms of Indigenous symbolic and visual art could also qualify as sequential art (e.g., rock paintings, birchbark scrolls, winter counts, or ledger art). Although McCloud’s is far from the only definition of comics,¹ it nevertheless evokes the potential cultural legacies of contemporary Indigenous comics and offers one example of comics scholarship gesturing, however incidentally, to traditions of Indigenous art.

Granted, substantial differences exist between these examples of earlier visual art and contemporary comics. However tenuous, the connection helps to dismantle the entrenched assumption that Native American narratives were exclusively oral in periods before European colonization (and that written literature has since wholly supplanted oral traditions).² As Margaret Noodin (formerly Noori) writes, “Read as narratives, visual images are the right place to begin when seeking the ancestors of today’s native comics” (59). Considering this legacy can also shake up the assumptions about oral literature and visual media. Just as Noodin makes the case for the narrativity of visual images and thus for comics as narratives, Hatfield’s discussion of comics definitions (“Indiscipline”) likewise addresses the debate whether comics should be properly considered literature or visual art. He notes that some scholars (e.g., Thierry Groensteen) conceive of comics as its own system and language, while others (e.g., Rocco Versaci, Hatfield himself), tend to consider comics as literature. These differences need not be adversarial; both can coexist in ways that advance comics study, as Hatfield suggests: “Comic studies, in short, needs to develop an intentional interdisciplinarity, one that acknowledges, without merely surrendering to, the field’s heterogenous nature” (para. 6). The divergent approaches to the study of comics and any resultant anxiety over categorizing them is further instructive, insofar as it parallels questions in Indigenous literary criticism regarding how Indigenous comics might complicate distinctions between written literature and oral traditions. Comics, although long established as objects of literary study, nonetheless have an unruly nature and retain their connections to popular, independent, or underground art traditions. And while comics continue to expand

and complicate understandings of literature, Indigenous storytelling traditions likewise complicate and challenge literary categories.

However defined, comics have long featured representations of Indigenous peoples in both independent and mainstream presses. “Mainstream” here refers to those larger presses (e.g., Marvel, DC, Vertigo) primarily dedicated to the subgenre of superhero comics. These well-established publishers feature the common run of Native American stereotypes, examined extensively by Michael Sheyahshe in *Native Americans in Comic Books*: Indians as vanished populations, sidekicks, ecological nobles, and so on. These depictions in mainstream comics leave much to be desired; however, several comics creators, especially Indigenous artists and writers, have since contended with these depictions and provided alternatives. Despite, or because of, mainstream comic depictions, many Indigenous-authored comics become an important counterhegemonic form, and many of these works appear as standalone projects from independent presses. If, as scholars, including Jodi Byrd and Philip Deloria, have so clearly shown, images of Indigenous peoples have been appropriated and deployed by settler colonial logics (from the Boston Tea Party to hipsters in headdresses), then the visual medium of comics are an important form for speaking back to, reclaiming, and decolonizing Indigenous depictions. These motivations inspire the work of Indigenous comic artists who incorporate mainstream drawing styles or superhero plots. Some creators also raise the point that even mainstream, stereotypical depictions can be celebrated by Indigenous audiences as characters with whom they can identify. As Sheyahshe writes, “Being far removed from urban life made me hold on to whatever I could identify with, especially a Native American super hero in a comic book” (1). Recognizing this point in no way diminishes the need for Indigenous portrayals that contribute to what Michelle Raheja terms “visual sovereignty,” strategies of self-representation in visual media that support self-determination. Visual sovereignty runs throughout the wider visual culture in which Indigenous comics are anchored, a creative impulse that shows how Indigenous artists among other “groups in capitalist society participate in shaping media and consumption-based representations of themselves in the dominant culture” (6). A few striking examples include the street art of Votan Ik and the group Nsrgrnts; the multidisciplinary artist Demian DinéYazhi’ and the collective R.I.S.E.: Radical Indigenous Survivance & Empowerment; the high-resolution, reproducible

graphics of Dylan Miner; and the games, animations, and art (not to mention comics) of Elizabeth LaPensée. The spirit of visual sovereignty and the strategies these artists use to express it are also strongly evident in independent comics.

Each collection features creative teams whose members work in textual and visual modes that alternatively ignore or incorporate the prevailing superhero genre as they tell both original and traditional stories. Working together to present stories in graphic form offers opportunities to reflect on Indigenous literature's ongoing relationship with oral traditions. Indigenous writers are frequently asked how their work engages or relates to oral storytelling. In analyzing the connections between oral and written discourse, Christopher Teuton notes:

Through the construction of oral cultures Native Americans became objects of European logocentrism. Ironically, contemporary Native American literature's reification and nostalgia for Native oral traditions may be interpreted as a fulfillment of the West's logocentric desires. Native American writers and critics often fulfill the logocentric desires of the West by describing, referencing, and claiming the centrality of Native American oral traditions over literate traditions. (23)

Teuton describes the splitting of Native American oral and written discourses into a binary, one he seeks to attenuate by explaining the distinct functions but interdependent nature of oral, graphic, and critical modes. These insights align with the multimodal structure of comics, which themselves trouble a related binary between typographic and visual symbols and which engage readers' imaginations in ways reminiscent of oral storytelling's audience engagement. Indigenous writers and illustrators use the medium of comics to extend or further contend with these creative impulses and the shifting tensions between oral and written discourses.

Comics collections are collaborative productions, but given comics' use of written and visual communication, they also demand a unique kind of collaboration with their readers. Diverging from written lines of text, comics are more forthright about the nonlinear nature of reading practices; page layouts draw attention to sequence and to the reader's performance of closure between frames in order to make sense of the story. Given these complex, multimodal forms of encoding and

decoding, graphic narratives offer literary experiences that are deceptively immediate. As David Parker Royal writes, “Much like film, comics rely on a visual language that encourages a more immediate processing time within the reader. . . . This is not to suggest that comics are a more passive means of narrative. . . . Nonetheless, there is something relatively ‘direct’ about an image’s ability to affect reader response” (7).

Comics’ effect of visual immediacy depends on the reader’s assembling of sequential images; acts of closure rely in part on readers’ own biases; readers may feel intensely “at home” with their own subjective act of closure and less attentive to the ways in which their expectations and assumptions are partially conditioned by the creators’ formal choices. A famous example within Native American graphic narratives is Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas’s *Red: A Haida Manga*, which features Yahgulanaas’s unique style inspired by traditional Haida art and Japanese manga. Perhaps the most staggering innovation in *Red* is the incorporation of a Haida formline design for the comic panel divisions; Yahgulanaas displays the formline by recreating all the panels in miniature at the end of the book, with a note welcoming readers to rip out the pages and assemble it for themselves. Meanwhile, the frequently shifting point-of-view and the technique of subjective motion informed by Japanese manga intensifies the demands on readers to participate in the story via closure, to “take an active role in the storytelling” (Spiers 50). In her analysis of *Red*, Miriam Spiers notes closure’s connection to oral traditions: “This participatory reading practice is similar to Native oral storytelling traditions, which also demand a level of audience/reader investment that may be more difficult to reproduce in text-based novels” (51). Spiers articulates how comics demand readers’ engagement, despite seeming a more passive form given their visual immediacy. Taken together, the act of closure and the fact of group authorship allude to oral traditions within recent independent comics collections.

Folktales and Historical Documents: *Trickster* and *Native American Classics*

Trickster was published in 2010. Editor Matt Dembicki describes the collection’s purpose of celebrating Native American storytelling

traditions. He began by seeking out Native American storytellers, who he then paired with artists: “To ensure a proper fit between the written stories and the illustrations, the storytellers each selected an artist from a pool of contributing talents to render their stories” (225). Storytellers approved the storyboards and any edits that were made to their written versions. Leaving aside Dembicki’s questionable assertion that this editorial process gives readers “an opportunity to experience authentic Native American stories” (225), the least contentiously “authentic” aspect of this project is its staging of storytelling. The transmission of stories from telling to writing to storyboarding captures the act of storytelling and underscores its collaborative nature between speakers and listeners. The process also implies how these comics are *single* instances and provisional versions of stories, not authoritative accounts, as often implied in earlier collections informed by salvage ethnographies. These collaborations between different individuals celebrate the diversity of Native American storytelling traditions while also, one hopes, recognizing the limits of adapting them to comics format. For instance, Dembicki acknowledges that “it’s impossible to capture the art of Native American oral storytelling visually,” while nevertheless maintaining that comic adaptations can uniquely engage readers (qtd. in Aldama, “Multicultural” 17).

If *Trickster* works primarily with folktales, a subsequent collection, *Native American Classics*, adapts historical written documents. Each story in *Native American Classics* adapts a text by prominent Native American authors from the nineteenth or early twentieth centuries, including Zitkala-Ša, E. Pauline Johnson, and Charles Eastman. That is, contemporary writers and illustrators draw from existing print sources. Although adapted from print, the selections in *Native American Classics* also distinguish between written and oral traditions. Three of the comics employ a frame narrative situating the narrator as a storyteller. The most sustained example of the three, Charles Eastman’s “On Wolf Mountain,” was adapted by Joseph Bruchac and illustrated by Robby McMurtry. Eastman appears in the beginning as a storyteller for a troop of Boy Scouts, the organization Eastman helped found. Eastman tells the scouts the story of Manitoo the wolf. The panels shift from Eastman’s performance to depict Manitoo’s story directly, although Eastman’s face and hand gestures appear in frames throughout the comic. Thus, this adaptation not only

illustrates the story being told but also reminds readers how, like comics, oral storytelling is both a verbal *and* visual experience.

Native American Classics exhibits conventions common to the period in which the source texts were written: nineteenth-century Native writers (many educated in residential boarding schools) adopted English language and literary conventions, using colonial language and written forms in order to address and sometimes challenge widespread dispossession, removal, and assimilation. In so doing, and in writing to EuroAmerican audiences, these writers themselves deployed tropes of the Vanishing Indian or Noble Savage as rhetorical strategies. Although it may be troubling to feature these adaptations without accompanying explanations of political context and literary history, because of the ways they might seem to recapitulate negative hegemonic conceptions of Native Americans, closer attention to the comics' visual elements shows how they complicate and revise these assumptions. For example, both Randy Keedah's cover illustration (a Western setting with two men on horseback) and Ryan Huna Smith's illustration alluding to James Earle Fraser's iconic sculpture, *The End of the Trail* evoke the mythology of the frontier. However, neither horse nor rider in Smith's image seems vanquished, only resting (reinforced by the nighttime setting, with a full moon silhouetting them). And despite the two riders heading into the sunset in Keedah's image, the presence of a broken, abandoned wagon wheel in the foreground—as well as the option of reading the light as a sunrise—complicates straightforward interpretation of the image as one symbolizing EuroAmerican ascendancy.

Joseph Erb's illustration on the title page of the collection exemplifies present-day artists commenting visually on these historical texts. Erb's image includes stylized figures arranged with characters from the Cherokee syllabary, the central figure's mouth merging with a smartphone. The frontispiece depicts continuity from older looking traditional designs to Sequoyah's invention of the Cherokee syllabary in the nineteenth century to modern-day technologies. Similarly, Arigon Starr's contribution to the collection also uses technology to convey a sense of continuation; her image, paired with Carlos Montezuma's 1916 poem "Changing Is Not Vanishing," shows generations of people standing in a line; the boy in the foreground holds a digital tablet and wears earbuds (130). The images throughout *Native American Classics* thus speak back to their preceding source texts,

recalling a period of Native American literary and political writing while also prompting readers to further consider the sociopolitical contexts and legacies of these writers and their works. The collaborations and visual adaptations in *Native American Classics* allow conversations to emerge on the page.

Native American literary criticism features relevant attempts to imagine and explore such collaborative exchanges, which resonate with the motives in these collections. In *Contemporary American Indian Literature and the Oral Tradition*, Susan Brill de Ramírez advocates “conversive” scholarship (attesting to the conversational power and the conversational nature of literature) as a way of apprehending the relationship between textual and oral Indigenous traditions. She also notes the importance of delineating the limits of what she identifies as Western literary criticism when applied to Native American literature, emphasizing careful self-reflection, “if we seek new words and language for speaking about these literatures in their own terms, then it is essential we learn the limits of our own conceptions and begin to step beyond them” (42). Applied to comics scholarship, this approach would require a willingness to resist any hasty definition of comics or ghettoization of it to a particular field of study in order to help “articulate a rigorous pluralism—self-aware, synthetic, and questioning” that would promote such scholarship’s flourishing (Hatfield para. 39).

Brill de Ramírez addresses the oversimplified associations between Native literary works and oral traditions, particularly when they narrow the interpretive possibilities for Native American literature. For instance, the connection of oral traditions to contemporary literature can fix the two in a successive relationship, locking oral traditions in the past (not unlike the stereotypical Native American characters in superhero comics). Oral traditions may also be figured as less complex than written texts. Brill de Ramírez asserts that the connections between Native American oral traditions and contemporary literature are nonetheless valid provided such problematic depictions are overcome. The same holds true between oral traditions and comics: their alignment, instead of suggesting the linear succession of verbal and visual modes, can highlight the multiple ways storytellers combine them to create and transmit narratives.

A conversive approach differs from discursive approaches such as Bakhtinian dialogics, given that “a heteroglossia in which distinct

voices assert their own subjectivities and presences alternately through dialogue is a substantially different reality than the conversive interweaving of voices and persons that co-create and transform their own stories and each other through their relational storytelling communication” (Brill de Ramírez 73). These relational dynamics suggests that “American Indian writers, informed by their respective oral traditions, invite a more directly interactive participation from their readers—readers who within this context are more accurately termed *listener-readers*” (129, emphasis original). Comics and graphic narratives likewise complicate notions of textuality, literariness, and orality, since they demonstrate relational, conversive qualities in both their composition and their reception as writers, artists, consultants, and readers engage in transformative experiences as reader-listeners and as storyteller-guides.

Comics and the Future: *Moonsbot*

The conversive nature in these comics recurs in *Moonsbot: The Indigenous Comics Collection*, which was crowdfunded on Kickstarter and published by Alternate History Comics in 2015 (a second volume was crowdfunded and published in 2017). As with the others, the comics in *Moonsbot* are collaborations between writers, illustrators, colorists, and consultants. Indigenous authors predominate, many drawing from their own storytelling traditions, although some conferred with other Indigenous communities or with non-Indigenous writers and artists for their contributions. The editor’s foreword and publisher’s afterword foreground their concern that the stories in the collection be accurate and culturally appropriate for inclusion. Editor Hope Nicholson writes, “There is no single, homogenous native identity and *Moonsbot* is an extensive exploration of the vast variety of indigenous storytelling in North America. . . . The writers researched largely untold stories from their own communities and communicated to the artists visual concepts that would best represent their community” (7). In the afterword, President of Alternate History Comics Andy Stanleigh notes that storytelling is more than mere entertainment and thus “it was necessary to get permission from elders in the communities in which the creators in the book are from” (158). While Stanleigh’s statement should not be taken as the

last word on the subject nor guarantee fulfillment of all obligations, it is significant to note the explicit intent to extend storytelling traditions respectfully and that this goal expresses a spirit of conversation and collaboration occurring beyond the formal level of the comics themselves.

While *Native American Classics* adapted historical testimonies and texts and *Trickster* retold traditional stories, the *Moonsbot* collection features both adaptations from oral traditions and original narratives created expressly for the comics form. Compared with the other two collections, *Moonsbot* demonstrates a keen interest in the future (if not other temporalities entirely), with several contributions drawing on science fiction themes. There are several extraterrestrial stories, and the title comes from the Buffy Sainte-Marie song by the same name, which features the refrain “Off into outer space you go my friends.” These imaginative combinations of storytelling and science fiction exemplify Grace Dillon’s concept of “Indigenous futurisms” first presented in the introduction to the science fiction anthology *Walking the Clouds*. The collection’s future-oriented tone is also fitting given that it points to the future of Indigenous comics. *Moonsbot* brings together prominent writers and illustrators working in this field; many contributors to the previous collections appear again in this volume. Even the table of contents seems to replicate the evolution of Indigenous comics, including examples of representation in mainstream presses, adaptations, and original comics: the first of the thirteen contributions is a reprint from mainstream comic artist David Mack’s graphic novel *Echo: Vision Quest* (published by Marvel), the third is a reprint from *Trickster*, and the final is an original narrative created specifically for comic form.

Moonsbot exhibits a collaboration most obviously in the efforts of writers, artists, and audiences together creating meaning through sequential images. In addition, several contributions employ narrators as characters in storytelling scenarios in order to depict and emphasize the collaborative efforts of narrators and audiences. Overall, *Moonsbot* shows a fair balance between homodiegetic narrators, who take part in the narrative present of the comic, and extradiegetic narrators, who may appear in the comic only as narrative boxes (captions or “voiceovers” whose narrative function is distinct from that of speech bubbles, a unique way in which comics convey narrative layers). In each case, one can further distinguish whether a given

narrative box represents a situation of oral storytelling occurring within the story; some of the homodiegetic characters deliberately find themselves in the situation of telling a story out loud to another.

For example, in “Tł̄chq Nàowo: The Return of the Spirit” (written by Richard Van Camp with thanks to Rosa Mantla and illustrated by Nicholas Burns), a Dene grandmother explains to her grandchildren the traditions behind the “Night the Spirits Return.” Shifts in artistic styles signal shifts between narrative layers. As the grandmother speaks, the panel art changes style (from a typical outlined comics style to soft, unlined pastel images), and the grandmother’s speech shifts from word bubbles to narrative boxes, indicating the shift in the depicted action from the narrative present to the stories she tells about paying respect to family, ancestors, and the caribou who sustain them. These two styles blend together in the last panel, as the narrative boxes and speech bubbles converge. The art styles also converge here: the characters stand before a fire, but the smoke is only partly outlined, and within it shadows of caribou appear in the same muted style as shown in the grandmother’s stories. The art thus reinforces the narrative’s message that gratitude and ceremony sustain good relationships between humans and nonhumans, while challenging the idea of fragmented succession between past and present.

Another example of a homodiegetic narrator telling a story aloud is the character Archer in the short story “Ayanisach,” which author Todd Houseman explains is Cree for “he who tells stories of the past.” In keeping with the collection’s futurist theme, this comic inverts the typical intergenerational exchange of an adult telling a story to a younger audience. Here, the protagonist Archer’s grandmother asks him to tell her the story of what has happened in the past. The panels at first suggest a contemporary setting, but as Archer begins telling the story the comic reveals a temporal twist, with futuristic images of spaceships and robotic humanoids suggesting that they are living in a future dystopia. (Readers learn rapacious mechanical “dispectors” and “rippers” have corrupted Earth before being chased off the planet by Archer’s ancestors.) Archer’s speech transforms from speech bubbles to unassigned text appearing in the gutter between the panels that depict his story. Artist Ben Shannon elaborates the narrative shift by shading the gutter. Instead of standard white space, the gutter shifts over the course of the story from black to white. When Archer begins his story, the starry sky behind

him in the panel bleeds into the gutter; for the duration of his story, the gutter remains a starfield, returning back to the starry sky in the narrative present as Archer concludes. Although subtle, these choices reinforce the sense of an alternate temporality, with the added symbolic weight of the stars emphasizing longer timescales. At the end of “Ayanisach,” Archer arrives at a pipe ceremony, where he prepares to tell the story once more, this time to others his age. Archer’s retelling signals the transmission of cultural knowledge and reinforces the gutter’s aesthetics, showing how stories do not cement linear chronologies so much as circulate through them, rehearsing identity and positioning speakers and audience members within time and space. These crucial aspects of storytelling connect it to notions of survival, demonstrated by one of the assembled characters at the end of the comic who says, “knowing our past will ultimately take us to the future” (138).

Meanwhile, *Moonshot’s* heterodiegetic narrators can also be split between those who seem to be telling a story orally and those who do not. For example, Dayton Edmonds’s “Coyote and the Pebbles” features narrative text boxes with markers that evoke oral discourse. The first text box reads, “When Mother Earth was very young,” and the final panel’s boxes explain how Coyote’s error with the pebbles resulted in the stars in the night sky. David Robertson’s “Ochek” features no establishing narrative boxes, but boxes do appear in the end, explaining how a constellation came to be. Others are less explicitly oral. Ian Ross and Lovern Kindzierski’s “Home,” for instance, starts with narrative boxes identifying the setting—“Winnipeg,” “The Manitoba Museum”—that are less likely to be interpreted as being spoken aloud to an audience. Finally, Jay and Joel Odjick’s “First Hunt,” shows narrative boxes blending in a way reminiscent of the comic “On Wolf Mountain” from *Native American Classics*, but whereas the latter story visually blends the storyteller’s gestures with images of the story being told, “First Hunt” employs a degree of free indirect discourse as the narrative boxes blend the story of a boy’s first hunt with his thoughts in the moment.

These examples underscore the orality of comics. As combinations of verbal and visual modes, their textuality does not simply transcribe speech but works with their visual components to encourage audience engagement in ways akin to oral storytelling. In *The System of Comics*,

Thierry Groensteen argues that the form of comics be considered its own unique language, aside from written literature, film, or other comparisons: "One has often ceded to the temptation of presenting comics as a branch or a subproduct of literature. . . . If I prefer, for my own part, to speak of *verbal* functions as opposed to *written* functions, it is because I think that speech in comics is closer to speech in the cinema than in the literary text (even dialogue)" (128, author emphasis). These recent Native comics collections extend Groensteen's point via their engagement with oral traditions and simultaneous experimentation with historical adaptations and superhero and science fiction genres. However comics might be categorized, emphasizing their orality can nonetheless show their significance as an example of literature that contends or extends Native American oral traditions. Susan Brill de Ramírez argues that literatures "more closely connected to their oral roots . . . will tend to demonstrate more obviously a range of conversive literary structures" (218). She cites such examples as classical Greek and medieval European literature, although she does acknowledge that more recent, textually informed literary works can also exhibit conversive structures.

Indeed, the growing field of Native comics, with their sometimes-futurist themes and verbal modes, should demonstrate that recent literature can possess conversive structures as well as older, classical works. If, as Brill de Ramírez writes, "contemporary American Indian writers transform the domain of the alienated and distant text into a conversive medium that strives to elicit an interactive relationship between the listener-reader and the storytelling-text" (133–34), then comics and other graphic narratives clearly extend this conversive potential. Comics' multimodal format and frequently collaborative nature underscore relationships between artists, writers, and readers. Their often-unpretentious categorization as popular art expands their readership, but their study can also upset assumptions that they are simplistic or unsophisticated (assumptions that have been similarly applied to oral traditions). And just as oral traditions do not exist exclusively prior to written ones, neither is the art of comics exclusively "postliterary," as shown in those definitions of comics that include earlier forms of graphic representation. Comics capaciously lend themselves to the visual and linguistic range of Indigenous narratives, as Margaret Noodin observes in her claim that Anishinaabe language is better

represented in a variety of narrative modes, that “if centuries of Anishinaabe were able to develop and deploy a complex agglutinative structure made mostly of verbs to communicate images, ideas, and relationships across time, there must then be a way of interpreting them based on more than printed and published texts. Furthermore, the layered construction of the sound and meaning is perfectly suited to the comic format” (Noori 58). To add to Noordin’s claim, one of the crucial types of relationships comics communicate is that of the storytelling dynamic between teller and audience.

Besides their innovations and accomplishments as a form, Indigenous comics also build community. Their accessibility and popularity continue to grow, as shown by the first annual Indigenous Comic Con, which took place in Albuquerque on November 18–20, 2016, hosted by Native Realities Press and A Tribe Called Geek. The con’s website invited attendees to come get their “Indigenerd” on, presenting “nerd” as an acrostic: “Native and Indigenous artists and creators uniting; Everyone is welcome to learn, play, and celebrate; Raising the Indigenous spirit through pop culture; Defying conventions and stereotypes all day long” (“Indigenous”). The message is an inspiring one for the convention attendees, and one that could equally apply to the growing body of collaborative work that is Indigenous comics. The con continued to grow with subsequent gatherings in 2017 and 2018, alongside the expansion of Native Realities Press and the founding of a headquarters and storefront, Red Planet Book and Comics in Albuquerque. Meanwhile, in May 2018 Marvel Comics debuted Snowguard, an Inuk character created in extended consultation with Inuit director and producer Nyla Innuksuk, in issue 20 of *Champions* (Zub). Clearly, the “hopeful interventions” King observed Indigenous-authored comics making nearly a decade ago have advanced as independent and mainstream presses feature Indigenous artists and stories (222). Indigenous uses of pop culture deserve widespread attention for the compelling and entertaining ways they assert Indigenous presence against pernicious narratives of Indigenous peoples as vanished or tied to reductive notions of authentic traditions. These comics do not simply extend older storytelling traditions but engage present issues concerning Indigenous well-being in myriad contemporary styles, demonstrating the continuing resurgence of narratives within Indigenous visual cultures.

Notes

1. Charles Hatfield observes the growing skepticism about cementing definitions in comics studies, finding the attempt to define comics particularly troubling when presented as though to announce a field of study already decades underway. Hatfield acknowledges, "Definitions do continue to play a structuring if occluding role in comics studies, leading to different understandings of what the field ought to include" (para. 12).
2. Phillip Round notes how "many precontact forms of graphic communication held sway across North America. . . . Native people were already employing a wide array of sign systems prior to the arrival of Europeans" (11). Round states these systems "performed something akin to the role of written language, extending semiotic production deep into the material culture of the various tribes, as well as into the natural world in which their communities flourished" (12).

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